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Teachers' view of the grammar school curricular reform – the case of the Republic of Slovenia

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Abstract:

In the first part of the article revelations of curriculum theory about modernizing syllabi are presented. In the second part of the article, the results of the empirical research are presented. The aim of the study was to determine the gains of curriculum reform and to alert on the problems that are aggravating the implementation of redesigned syllabi.

Keywords: Republic of Slovenia; grammar school; curricular reform; syllabi; implementation;

1. Introduction

In the 2008/2009 school year, grammar schools (*gimnazija*) in the Republic of Slovenia began introducing redesigned syllabi that were defined by the Council of Experts for General Education of the Republic of Slovenia in February 2008. The implementation of redesigned syllabi is gradual. It started with the first years in 2008/2009, followed by all other years in 2009/2010. Syllabus redesign was based on the Guidelines, Principles and Aims of Curricular Reform (Smernice, načela in cilji posodabljanja, 2007) that upgraded the curriculum redesign from the period 1996-1998 and complemented it with the following principles: teacher and school autonomy, openness and choice, learning aim and process development approach, a competence approach (Key Competencies, 2002) or the inclusion of competencies, integration of courses and disciplines or the integrative curriculum and the developmental monitoring of pupils' results.

Schools and teachers are provided autonomy and professional responsibility not only by the choice of methods of forms of work but also by documents at national level. Autonomy means looking for one's own way to the previously agreed aim.

Openness and choice are becoming inevitable in the grammar school education area. The results of grammar school education analysis in some European countries (Ivanuš Grmek et al, 2007a, pp. 81; Vršnik Perše et al, 2007) show the level of discretionary choice in Slovenian grammar school programme to be low in comparison with some other countries (e.g. Sweden, Holland, Finland, Ireland or France).

At the outset it is necessary to define what will be the strategy or the starting point of curricular reform: whether this will be the learning content, the learning aims or the learning process. We can ask ourselves which curricular reform strategy the curriculum experts consider more important. As it turns out, they favour a comprehensive approach to curriculum reform; however, they admit at the same time warning that this does not show in practice (Klein, 1991, pp. 335-342; Pinar, 2003) because one strategy often dominates in curriculum development at the

expense of the other two, or, as Kelly (1989) has pointed out, practice often reveals a learning-content or learning-aim strategy of curriculum development with certain elements of process-development strategy in the planning. Analyses of grammar school syllabi from 1998 (Ivanuš Grmek et al, 2007b) further corroborate this. An orientation towards the process-development strategy of planning, which in addition to achieving aims emphasizes the learning process, development of teacher autonomy, achievement of key competencies and elements of sustainable development, also has an influence on knowledge assessment and grading. This is thus a move from normative to criteria-based grading (Gipps, 1994), whereby expected results represent a framework for both teacher and pupil.

2. Purpose of empirical research

Because syllabi represent important school documents and have an influence on the work of teachers and pupils alike, it is necessary to monitor their introduction. For this reason our empirical study focused on the analysis of modernized syllabi during their implementation stage.

The empirical study focused on the following two partial problems: (1) the gains of modernized grammar school syllabi for the first study year; (2) drawbacks to the implementation of modernized syllabi as perceived by grammar school teachers.

3. Methodology

Our study was based on a descriptive and causal non-experimental method of empirical research.

The study included teachers (n=95) from Slovene grammar schools in the 2008/2009 school year. Female teachers prevailed (90.5%). The majority had a university degree (92.6%). The sample of teachers was balanced in terms of their work experience; more than half of them (55.8%) had up to 20 years' of experience, the rest (44.2%) had over 20 years' of work experience. The sample included teachers of mathematics, foreign languages, Slovenian and geography. At the level of inferential statistical processing, the non-random sample of teachers is described as a simple random sample from a hypothetical population.

We collected the data with the help of individual random field surveying, which took place between March and May of 2009. The questionnaire comprised open-ended and closed questions. The majority of the latter were dichotomous questions. The questionnaire possesses the necessary measurement characteristics, and its results are presented graphically. We used the frequency distribution values of the (categories of) measured characteristics.

4. Presentation and interpretation of results

Let us first examine the results of the analysis for detecting the gains of curricular reform and then the results for detecting drawbacks in the implementation of redesigned syllabi.

4.1. Detecting curricular reform gains

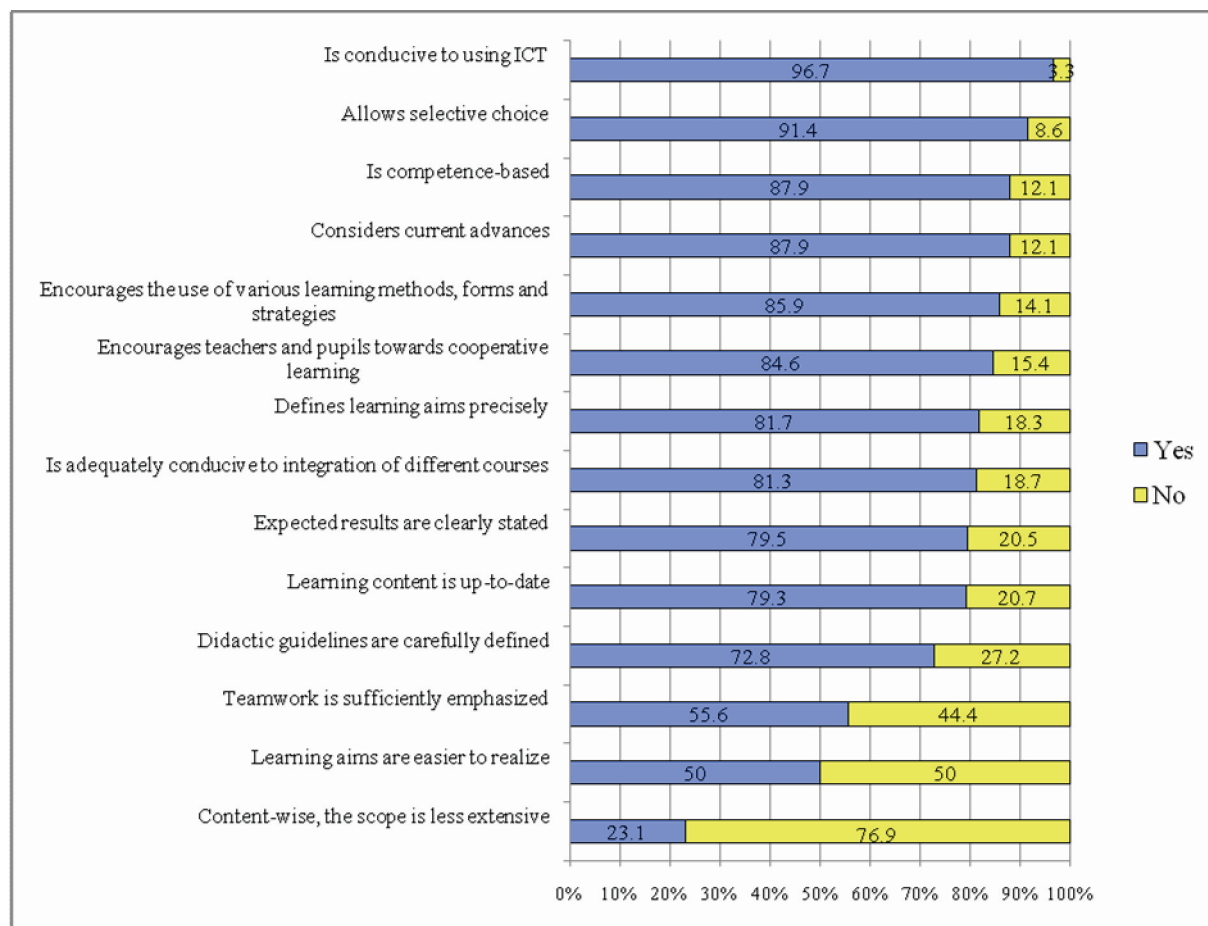


Figure 1: Structural percentage (%) of teachers in terms of detecting curricular reform gains

Among these characteristics, we will focus first on the three at the bottom of the ordered series, where the highest percentage of teachers fails to reach the expected level of change. Content-wise, these teachers do not consider the redesigned syllabus less extensive than the old one (76.9%). Half of them (50.0%) do not consider the defined learning aims easier to achieve than in the old syllabi, and 44.4% believe that the syllabus insufficiently emphasizes teachers' teamwork. However, more than 70.0% of the teachers are pleased with the didactic guidelines and the clearly defined expected results. Additionally, the majority of teachers think that the redesigned syllabus sufficiently encourages integration of various courses (81.3%) and see the learning aims as being stated with sufficient clarity (81.7%). Even more, teachers see greater opportunity for cooperative learning (84.5%) and the use of various learning methods and strategies in the classroom (85.9%). Teachers consider the following characteristics to be the most evident, necessary and important advantages of the reformed grammar school curriculum: inclusion of the latest achievements in a particular subject area and competence-based design (both had 87.9% support), optional course content (91.4%) and, finally, at the top of the rankings with 96.7%, the use of information and communication technology (ICT). This analysis of the gains of the curricular reform on the basis of teachers' response does show modernization principles as being realized in the implementation of syllabi in school practice.

In the same way as the gains, the drawbacks that were detected by the teachers will first be presented graphically in a series ranked in terms of their frequency (f%) of appearance.

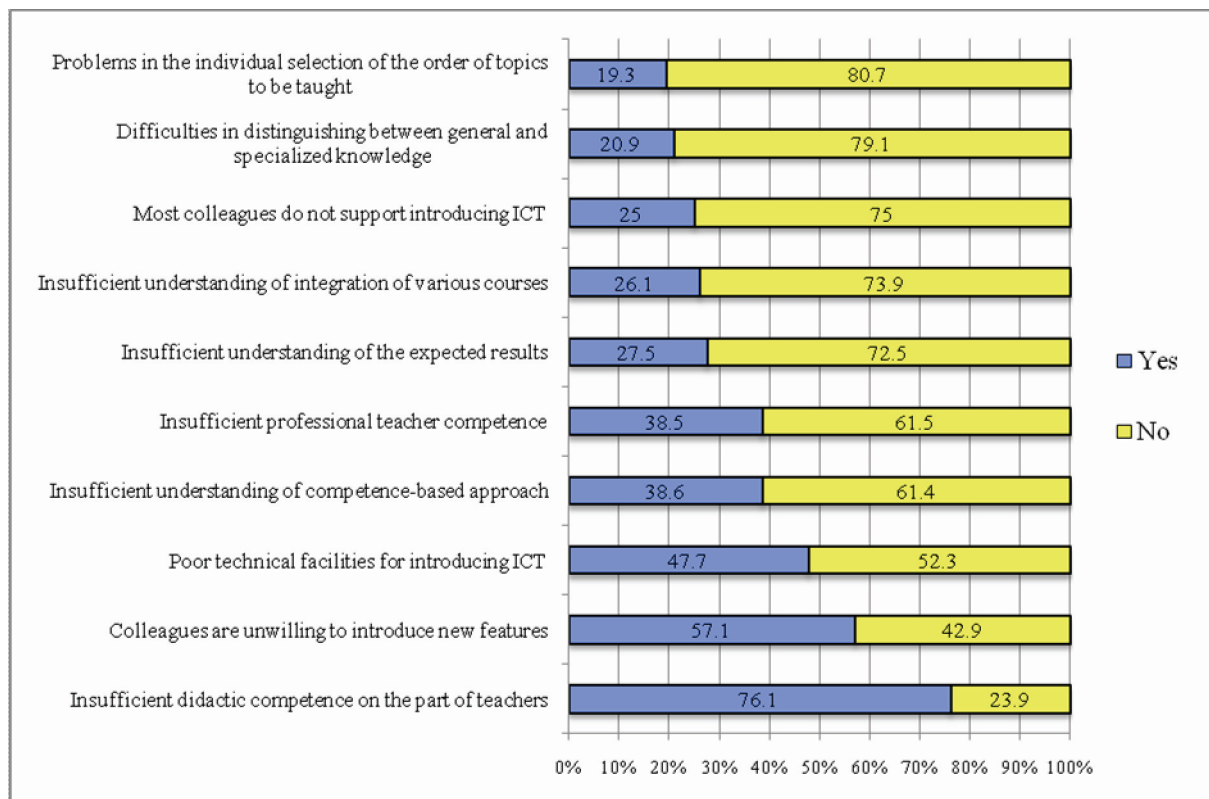


Figure 2: Structural percentage (f%) of teachers in terms of detecting curricular reform drawbacks

In Figure 2, the bottom features those disadvantages that were most often pointed out by teachers. The most common is their didactic competence (76.1%), followed by the unwillingness of some colleagues to cooperate in implementing new achievements, which was pointed out by more than half the teachers (57.1%). A relatively high proportion of teachers (47.7%) warned about poor technical facilities for introducing ICT in schools. This is followed by their problems in understanding the competence-based approach and insufficient professional competence (38.5%). Less than a third of teachers anticipate problems with understanding the expected results (27.5%) and with integration of various courses (26.1%), and a quarter mention lack of support for introducing ICT (25.0%). Last but not least, it is necessary to point out the problem the teachers (20.9%) had in distinguishing between general and specialized knowledge and in defining the sequence of course topics (19.3%) in view of the fact that the syllabus is not designed in terms of four years. Even though grammar school teachers participate in various projects of The National Education Institute of the Republic of Slovenia, projects that train them in introducing the latest achievements in the field, these teachers still felt that they had not yet received enough training for introducing some innovations.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of grammar school teachers' perceptions of the advantages and drawbacks to the implementation of redesigned syllabi in practice has shown that the majority specify the following gains: integration of different courses, clear definition of learning aims, cooperative learning, the use of various teaching methods, forms and strategies in the classroom, consideration of current professional advances, competence-based syllabus design, elective capacity and the use of ICT. The most frequently detected disadvantages were teachers' level of didactic competence, colleagues' unwillingness to cooperate in implementing new features and poor technical facilities for introducing ICT in schools.

The article singles out the advantages and disadvantages of redesigned grammar school syllabi in their introductory stage. We thus have the opportunity, on the one hand, to eliminate the deficiencies during implementation of the new syllabi, and, on the other, to offer further professional support in the areas where these teachers perceive manifest gains.

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